

Sometimes crying 'wolf' is a good thing

By **JOE BALYEAT** State Representative

I was born and raised in Montana where a man's word was his bond, his handshake good as gold. Native Montanans are fighting mad on the wolf issue because they believe the feds have repeatedly broken their word, reneged on the original deal; and that our traditional hunting way of life is paying the price for this violated trust. As an avid bow hunter north of Yellowstone, I've often videotaped wolf tracks and witnessed marauding wolves in bighorn country while simultaneously noting the dramatic decline in bighorn and moose populations in the area.

Meanwhile, longtime local residents have cried in vain about wolf depredation on more numerous species like elk. They argue the calf/cow ratio has been devastated by wolves; that the Yellowstone herd is teetering on a population cliff. Further, they argue this devastation is occurring despite assurances in the original wolf introduction plan that such a decline wouldn't occur.

The original 1990 introduction document was titled "Wolves for Yellowstone? A Report to Congress and the Department of Interior." It documented the historical (20 year) calf/cow ratio at 33 percent average and (based on statistical modeling) argued that wolf introduction wouldn't significantly reduce this ratio. Their statistical model had one major flaw - it only estimated the number of elk killed; without differentiating the type of elk - that wolves tend to selectively prey upon calves - and could potentially decimate a herd by wiping out its "replacement stock" long before the total herd size declined enough to start limiting the number of wolves. Is there evidence? Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd has argued that their surveys reveal a calf ratio dropping below 10 percent - far below the 30 percent needed to maintain stable herd populations.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks surveys paint a different picture - a calf ratio of 28-29 percent; only slightly below the 30 percent target. Yet debate intensifies regarding the accuracy of FWP game surveys. The bipartisan Legislative Audit Committee (on which I serve) has expressed deep concern, and recently had a near-unanimous vote mandating a performance audit of FWP game census techniques.

I also serve as vice-chairman of the House FWP Committee. Because of increasingly dire local reports, and the huge disparity in calf survey numbers, I recently participated firsthand in a census of wintering Yellowstone elk in Paradise Valley. I joined House FWP Committee Chairman Dan Fuchs, R-Billings, and FWP Commission Chairman Dan Walker, and we were accompanied by FNYEH Chairman Bob Fanning and lifelong local resident Bill Hoppe. We surveyed nearly 500 elk wintering near Dailey Lake. To ensure accuracy, we had multiple individuals counting the same elk.

Our survey revealed a calf ratio of just over 12 percent - far below the original target of 30 to maintain a stable herd! Shocking, indeed.

De-list the wolves! I believe the feds must immediately remove the wolf from the endangered species list, so that Montana FWP can manage the rapidly exploding wolf populations (now well over 500). The original plan called for de-listing once 30 breeding pairs were established. Wolf reintroduction chief Ed Bangs admits there are now 46 breeding pairs!

Because I've dared speak out, pro-wolf enviros will no doubt bombard the papers with letters impugning my intelligence, while spouting reams of data diminishing wolf impact. But I have very good eyesight and I can certainly count. I know what I saw. And the wolf lobby's data suffers from a credibility gap - they've violated their own original agreements so many times, that native Montanans are no longer listening to them. Those of us who've spent our lives in the mountains around Yellowstone see elk populations aging rapidly and headed for a cliff. In our favorite hunting spots, we see limited bighorn and moose populations already decimated.

Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk isn't a radical "shoot, shovel and shut up" anti-wolf group. They've never suggested we totally eradicate wolves. They've simply argued that now is the time for the feds to live up to their original agreement; de-list the wolf from the endangered list so that Montana FWP can properly manage wolf populations relative to ungulate populations. It can't wait three more years. By then even the vast elk herd will have followed the sheep and moose into disaster. Sometimes, crying "wolf!" is a good thing.

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